

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# The Use of Comedy through the Figure of the Tragic Hero in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this project is to show the relevance of comic elements in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, two of the most important tragedies written by William Shakespeare. This study is based on both tragic heroes who appear in the aforementioned drama plays and how their use of linguistic strategies is able to create an atmosphere of humorousness. Both characters of Hamlet and Lear will be analysed separately in order to elaborate on different rhetorical devices used by these Shakespearean heroes, such as irony, puns or hyperboles, and their impact upon creating the tragic effect. After that, both tragedies will be compared in order to find the different nature of madness in Hamlet and Lear and the relevance of figures of speech when building the comic facet of these characters.

Key words: humour, tragic hero, irony, witty language, wordplay, madness, ambiguity, comicalness, rhetorical devices.

## **Resumen**

El objetivo de este proyecto es mostrar la importancia de elementos cómicos en *Hamlet* y *King Lear*, dos de las tragedias más importantes escritas por William Shakespeare. Este estudio está basado en los héroes trágicos protagonistas de dichas obras dramáticas y desvela cómo su uso del lenguaje es capaz de crear una atmósfera de comicidad. Ambos personajes, Hamlet y Lear, serán analizados por separado con el fin de profundizar en los distintos recursos retóricos utilizados por estos héroes shakesperianos, tales como la ironía, juegos de palabras o hipérboles, así como su impacto a la hora de crear un efecto trágico. Más tarde, se compararán ambas obras para poner de manifiesto la diferente naturaleza de la locura en Hamlet y Lear, y la relevancia de las figuras retóricas en el momento de construir la faceta cómica de estos personajes.

Palabras clave: humor, héroe trágico, ironía, lenguaje ingenioso, juego de palabras, locura, ambigüedad, comicidad, figuras retóricas.

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## 1. Introduction: the use of comic elements in Shakespeare's tragic heroes Hamlet and King Lear

Humour is seen as an appellant method used by William Shakespeare not only in his comedies but also in many of his tragic plays. The same as it is used for comic relief in profuse occasions, humour is also a strategy used by the “Sweet Swan of Avon” in some of his major tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Both fallible heroes portrayed in these plays are built through the signal relevance of words since language is the instrument through which their natures are developed along the aforementioned tragedies. Despite the fact that Shakespearean drama may be recognised as popular due to the use of comic characters such as the clown or the fool, it is also important to focus on the presence of humour in some dialogues between the principal characters. Comedy is here introduced as “thematic variation and ironic counterpoint” (McAlindon 6) in respect to tragic narrative. Both in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* the effect of heroic suffering is enhanced by humour. Hamlet and Lear are opposite tragic heroes in a certain way that their human character is transformed to such an extent that both become mad. Whereas Lear's madness displays the pessimistic reality in which he is sunk, Hamlet feigns his insanity in order to avenge his father's murder; the one and the other reach their final status by using different linguistic mechanisms related to comedy. In focusing on both tragic heroes, their use of language and their behaviour in punctual situations, this project will attempt to examine the reasons behind the use of comical devices such as puns, irony or hyperboles, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Furthermore, both characters will be compared through their use of humour in order to analyse the different nature of their madness.

## 2. The use of comical devices through the figure of the tragic heroes

### 2.1. *Hamlet*

Language is an essential element employed in *Hamlet* for the purpose of creating humour over the play. His linguistic tactics are the main focus through which the character of Hamlet is constructed. In fact, Bradley affirms that “Hamlet is the only one of the tragic heroes who can be called a humourist” (128).

The very first words of this main character, “A little more than kin and less than kind” (*H*, I, ii, 221)<sup>1</sup>, foresee Hamlet’s use of humour. As it will be explained later, through his wit, Hamlet will create a new personality in order to accomplish his revenge. It is his extraordinary knowledge of language which allows him to create this comicalness and which, as Eliot reveals, “for Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned” (102). This control of language can be perceived in several conversations such as the famous one between Polonius and the Prince of Denmark:

POLONIUS. [...] What doe you reade my Lord.

HAMLET. Words, words, words.

POLONIUS. What is the matter my Lord.

HAMLET. Betweene who. (*H*, II, ii, 1122-1125)

It can be perceived that Polonius wants to discover what Hamlet is reading but, through his apparent misinterpretations and provoking questions, the last one does not answer to Ophelia’s father and pretends that what he is reading is meaningless.

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<sup>1</sup> All references are taken from *Hamlet*, ed. by S. Wells, G. Taylor, J. Jowett, and W. Montgomery (Oxford University Press, 1986).

Hamlet's use of puns and figures of speech suggests his intellectual superiority as a student in the avowed University of Wittenberg. The way in which he refers to his mother's new marriage and new relation with his uncle Claudius is through irony and wordplay. When he says to his friend Horatio: "Thrift, thrift, *Horatio*, the funerall bak't meates/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (*H*, I, ii, 335-336) he is using a contemptuous language as he is referring to a difficult and harmful issue for him. So despite the fact that he is creating an atmosphere which should produce laughter among the audience, the reality is that Hamlet's puns contribute to increase his hate towards Claudius and his wish of avenging his father. Furthermore, irony is not only created through Hamlet's use of language but also through several comic situations. In Act III, an ironic scene takes place between Hamlet and Gertrude before the death of Polonius:

QUEENE. *Hamlet*, thou hast thy father much offended.

HAMLET. Mother, you haue my father much offended.

QUEENE. Come, come, you answere with an idle tongue.

HAMLET. Goe, goe, you question with a wicked tongue. (*H*, III, iv, 2223-2226)

Although these last wordplays and repetitions created by Hamlet should have a comic effect, they also reflect his emotions towards his mother, and originate one of the most tragic scenes of the play: the murder of Polonius. In this case, Hamlet's irony intensifies his emotional state at this time of the tragedy. This understatement between both characters represents a verbal duel which illustrates how the relation between mother and son will conclude in the final catastrophe. Later, in the following act, Hamlet's puns are used again during his conversation with Claudius about the corpse of Polonius:

KING. Now *Hamlet*, where's *Polonius*?



HAMLET. At supper.

KING. At supper, where.

HAMLET. Not where he eats, but where he is eaten [...]

.....

KING. Where is *Polonius*?

HAMLET. In heauen, send thether to see, if your messenger

finde him not there, seeke him i'th other place your

selfe, but indeed if you find him not this month, you

shall nose him as you goe vp the stayres into the Lobby. (*H*, IV, ii. 2492-2495, 2509-2513)

After burying Polonius by himself, Hamlet is interrogated by his uncle in order to find the dead body. Nevertheless, by twisting meanings he tries not to give a reasonable answer about the accurate location of Polonius. In an act full of fatal events, this insolence appears not only as a form of relief for Hamlet from the murder that he has just committed but also as a contrast with these harsh scenes that emphasise the tragic effect. Even at the end of the play, when Hamlet knows that his intentions have failed, he still uses mockery before the fight against Laertes by saying: "Ile be your foile *Laertes*, in mine ignorance / Your skill shall like a starre i'th darkest night / Stick fiery of indeed" (*H*, V, ii, 3469-3471). Hamlet continues to use his characteristic language even in that grave situation.

In addition to a witty language, Hamlet also employs other figures of speech which emphasise the comical side of the character during his attempts of revenge against his uncle. Hyperboles are used several times during his discourse with his mother Gertrude. Indeed,

when he is speaking of his father and his unfair death, Hamlet speaks from emotion; and it is the fact of talking about his uncle what obliges him to exaggerate his language. For instance, at the moment of arguing with Gertrude about his uncle's guilt in the preceding King's murder, he calls Claudius: "A murtherer and a villaine, / A slaue that is not twentieth part the tyth/ Of your precedent Lord [...]" (*H*, III, iv, 2300-2302).

## 2.2. *King Lear*

As it has been analysed in the foregoing tragedy, the tragic figure of Lear makes use of technical devices which produce an environment of humorousness. Despite the fact that language is also important throughout the story, comicalness is portrayed in the use of ironic situations. The several scenes of Lear with the Fool should be highlighted since apparently the roles of these opposed characters have been subverted. Albeit appearing at the beginning as a character used merely for comic relief as in other Shakespearean tragedies, the Fool develops into an essential figure in contrast with Lear. He may act as a mirror of reality to Lear since the beginning of the play, but it is in Act III when a significant distinction between these contrary characters is presented:

LEAR. [...] Ha? Here's three on's are  
sophisticated. Thou art the thing it selfe; vnaccommo-  
dated man, is no more but such a poore, bare, forked  
Animall as thou art. Off, off you Lendings: Come,  
vnbutton heere.

*Enter Glouster, with a Torch*

FOOLE. Prythee Nunckle be contented, 'tis a naughtie night

to swimme in [...] (*KL*, III, iv, 1749-1755)<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that the King sees how people, especially his supposed beloved daughters, are acting behind his back, the Fool helps him to see reality. This situation between a supposed sane character and a supposed mad character creates a sense of humorousness during the development of the tragedy. Also, this kind of scenes in which Lear and the Fool seem to have interchanged their roles may appear comic at first but it is this comicalness which contributes to create the tragic effect:

[...] the most significant aspect of the use of the comic in tragedy is not that which is due essentially to the love of variety and contrast [...] but rather that which seeks to portray a mental or emotional state more complex and more dramatically moving than the purer and simpler states to which the drama of the classical school commonly confines itself. (Alden 297)

The King becomes insane as a result of his ignorance of what is happening around him. And it is this lack of awareness the element which develops into absurd scenes that emphasise the tragedy. In one of his most famous soliloquies, Lear finishes his discourse saying: “O Foole, I shall go mad” (*KL*, II, ii, 1473), as he is aware of his insanity. The comical situations are also attained through the King and his “unreasonable childish temper” (Knight 165). The action becomes senseless to the extent that the play progresses and atrocious events start to occur. Accordingly, although the Fool uses real humour being a comic character himself, he is a necessary figure that sees and ratifies “the humorous potentialities” (Knight 165) in these, sometimes, pathetic episodes.

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<sup>2</sup> All references are taken from *King Lear*, ed. by S. Wells, G. Taylor, J. Jowett, and W. Montgomery (Oxford University Press, 1986).

Furthermore, the element of madness, which will be discussed later, is a comical device itself. As Knight emphasises, “the territory of the grotesque and the fantastic is Lear’s madness” (170). Lear’s tragedy, or rather, the reason why his story ends as a tragedy, is an absurdity. In fact, it is Lear who, through his madness, displays the ridiculous basis of his misfortune. Even the first scene of the play, which is perceived as the cause of the tragedy, has a comic effect: it is absurd that the King himself is the character which starts his own fall by not believing Cordelia’s words. Lear starts his own tragedy “by a foolish misjudgement” (Knight 162).

Besides, when Lear begins to understand how his daughters Regan and Gonerill have been unfaithful to him, he begins to use a very direct and scornful language. When he first discovers the actions that his eldest daughter is accomplishing in order to destroy him and his kingdom, he reacts by saying:

LEAR. [...] But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my Daughter,

Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,

Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a Byle,

A plague sore, or imbossed Carbuncle

In my corrupted blood [...] (*KL*, II, ii, 1408-1412)

As opposed to Hamlet, Lear expresses himself through more simple and familiar linguistic strategies. Lear’s witty language and wordplay underline an arduous background which shows his decline and the development of his failure. In one of the most tragic scenes at the beginning of the play, he uses other technical devices when referring to his daughter Cordelia. By using a hyperbolic and metaphorical language: "How sharper then a Serpents tooth it is, / To haue a thanklesse Childe. Away, away." (*KL*, I, iv, 773-774), the king is comparing her

youngest daughter to an animal which may be associated with an evilness figure. After being the only daughter who expresses the truthfulness of her feelings, Lear is offended by her words and gives her a negative connotation.

Although Lear's situations are full of understatements and provoking affirmations as one of his dialogues with Gloucester, they are the core which will resolve the tragedy as Lear will recover the sense:

GLOUSTER. [...] Is't not the King?

LEAR. [...] Adultery? thou shalt not dye: Dye for Adultery?

No, the Wren goes too' t, and the small gilded Fly

Do's letcher in my sight. Let Copulation thriue:

For Glousters bastard Son

Was kinder to his Father, then my Daughters

Got 'twene the lawful sheets.

.....

GLOUSTER. O, let me kisse that hand.

LEAR. Let me wipe it first; it smells of Mortality. (*KL*, IV, v, 2314, 2317-2322, 2336-2337)

Through these scornful statements and arranged vocabulary, both characters expose their real emotions and foresee the future scene in which Lear will recover his right mind.

### **3. Comparison between Hamlet and Lear: the relevance of humorousness in creating madness in both plays.**

The purpose of rhetorical devices may cause ambiguity in the mind of the audience since what is real may not be clear during the drama play. The use of witty language and figures of speech such as irony creates a dichotomy between what may be reality and what may be falseness. For example, when Hamlet starts pretending, his identity is suspicious as it is not clear if he is accomplishing a plan or his thirst of revenge has transformed him into a manipulator.

As opposed in *King Lear*, “by parody or exaggeration, Shakespeare exposes the shallowness or falsity betrayed in the speaker’s manner or language” (Doran 43). It is obvious that Hamlet’s madness is feigned in order to avenge the murder of his father. He even says to Horatio before parodying Claudius’ murder: “I must be idle” (*H*, III, ii, 1816). In the same way Hamlet’s witty language contributes to shape his insanity, this pretended madness transforms him into a “bitter court jester” (Draudt 78). Although Hamlet’s language of mockery can be ambiguous at some parts of the play, it is evident that he does not lie; in fact, he is the “touchstone of truth” (Doran 46). Despite the fact that Hamlet displays different voices (the one with his friend Horatio is different to the one with his mother), his personality is only one. He is just a young and doubtful man hurt by the cruel murder of his father who sees revenge as the solution to restore the order in the state of Denmark. Pretending his insanity is the only way of reaching his desire. By his disdainful language and wordplays he makes people around him think that he is insane. For example, after killing Polonius and talking to the Ghost before her mother, Gertrude says: “Alas, hee’s mad” (*H*, III, iv, 2310).

Hamlet’s use of figures of speech upon creating an atmosphere of humour is produced by virtue of his own idiosyncrasy. From the beginning of the drama play, the fact that Hamlet

is a cultured young man who has attended university is shown; and it is his knowledge that which helps him to create this witty language which transforms him into a feigned mad. Therefore, in contrast to the later tragic hero, Lear, “Hamlet’s intellectual genius” (Bradley 94) is crucial in the development of the Prince’s unreal mental illness.

Nevertheless, Lear’s madness is not pretended as his suffering turns into insanity due to his relation with his daughters. From the very beginning, it is known that he is suffering due to the process of dividing his kingdom between Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia: “O let me not be mad, not mad sweet heauen: / Keepe me in temper, I would not be mad” (*KL*, I, v, 879-880). The King’s madness starts when he has a poor vision to understand what is occurring around him. As Bradley remarks, “the most obvious symptom of Lear’s insanity, especially in its first stages, is of course the domination of a fixed idea” (249). Lear goes mad when his plan of dividing his inheritance fails due to the deportment of his daughters. Furthermore, the King has no inconvenience of being sincere throughout his direct language. For example, after the first absurd scene of the distribution of the kingdom, Lear says to Kent: “Follow me, thou shalt serue me, if I like thee no worse after dinner, I will not part from thee yet [...]” (*KL*, I, iv, 543-544).

It is through his madness that Lear starts to see reality. At the end of the play, he recovers his “sane state” after discovering that Cordelia was the only one of his daughters who actually loved him. In fact, it is this state of insanity which exposes “the heart of human reality” (Knight 192). Although the King’s madness appears to derive from the desire of avenging himself on his daughters, Lear’s mind penetrates into man’s nature. From the beginning, he knows that he is becoming insane; and his madness increases as he discovers how Gonerill and Regan truly are. Lear’s real insanity leads him to notice the love both Lear and Cordelia feel for each other.

Despite the fact that Hamlet's madness is feigned while Lear's is real, both tragic heroes reveal the truth through their discourse in every moment. As Knight affirms, "in madness thoughts deep-buried come to the surface" (201). In both tragic stories, madness is a temporary status through which Lear and Hamlet reach both fatal *dénouements*.

#### 4. Conclusion

While it is wide known that comedy and tragedy are considered as incompatibilities, this project has analysed the relevance of comicalness in two of the major tragedies written by William Shakespeare. The use of a concrete language based on comical devices is the support of both heroes in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Through their application of a language full of wordplays and several figures of speech such as hyperbole, repetition or understatement, the characters of Hamlet and Lear are built during the progress of their respective declines. The apparition of madness in both characters is one of the most important consequences of the employment of a witty language. Despite producing an ambiguous effect in reality due to the fact that the audience may not perceive the truthfulness of that both Hamlet and Lear's words, insanity is a key element through which they will reach their final failure. By making use of puns, provoking questions and other rhetorical devices, madness, feigned or real, is portrayed by Hamlet and Lear, respectively, as an instrument which shows or hides reality. Consequently, as Duncan affirms, "if comic, the tragic hero is moving toward a cleansing appreciation of his human fallibility" (795). In these late tragedies, humorousness must be seen as a significant weapon in order to build the corresponding natures of Hamlet and Lear that will come to the fall of both Shakespearean heroes. Accordingly, this project has considered the relevance of puns, ironic statements and other rhetorical strategies upon creating an atmosphere of comedy through which Hamlet's and Lear's madness is portrayed. While Hamlet's insanity is pretended and may be employed as an attempt to hide reality, Lear's obvious mental illness evinces the reality in which he has been living. It is difficult to



deny, therefore, as Samuel Johnson said, that Shakespeare succeeded in combining the capacity of arousing “laughter and sorrow” (16) not only in the human soul, but in his masterworks.

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